



THE UNIVERSITY *of* EDINBURGH

## Edinburgh Research Explorer

### Imagining the unimaginable value of 'value' in Saussure

**Citation for published version:**

Joseph, JE 2021, 'Imagining the unimaginable value of 'value' in Saussure', Paper presented at Modern Language Association Annual Convention, Toronto, Canada, 7/01/21 - 10/01/21.

**Link:**

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

**Document Version:**

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

**General rights**

Copyright for the publications made accessible via the Edinburgh Research Explorer is retained by the author(s) and / or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing these publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

**Take down policy**

The University of Edinburgh has made every reasonable effort to ensure that Edinburgh Research Explorer content complies with UK legislation. If you believe that the public display of this file breaches copyright please contact [openaccess@ed.ac.uk](mailto:openaccess@ed.ac.uk) providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.



## Imagining the Unimaginable Value of *Value* in Saussure

John E. Joseph, University of Edinburgh

[2] In Saussure's *Cours de linguistique générale* the first reference to 'value' comes when the distinction between the static and the evolutive is introduced. It can be ignored in most fields, he says, but the duality 'imposes itself imperiously on the economic sciences', which distinguish sharply between political and historical economics. Linguistics must proceed in the same way because, 'as in political economics, we face the notion of *value*; both sciences deal with a *system of equivalence between things of different orders*: in one, a job and a salary; in the other, a signified and a signifier'.

[3] Value takes centre stage when Saussure presents a language as a network of signs, each the conjunction of a mental concept, the signified, with a mental sound-image, the signifier.

The term 'sound-image' is deceptive, though, because the text makes clear that a signifier isn't really an image, but a value. The signifier is whatever is activated in my mind when I hear /tri/, or /arbr/, such that I recognise it as signifying, as part of a meaningful sign. Or that gets activated in my mind when I say /arbr/, or am about to do so. It has some enduring manifestation, which seems to give it a physical character; and to represent it in an enduring way we have recourse to letters, or to a spectrogram or some other visual manifestation.

But then that representation appears to be what the sound-image actually is, as if we had a store of phonemic transcriptions in our heads. Saussure knew that letters are a recent historical development, and writing is marginalised in his linguistics. Yet faced with a blackboard to draw a representation of the linguistic sign on, what could he do with the sound-image but spell it out? – though this worked against what he was saying about them being pure values.

So too with the concept, which suggests something other than a pure value. Here the absurdity is manifest when, after using the drawing of a tree to show how a language *doesn't*

work, the *Course* uses the same drawing, or nearly the same, to show how it *does* work. On p. 65 the drawing of the tree is meant to be taken as the thing, and on p. 67, as the concept. Little surprise that so many people, including linguists, take the signified to be what Frege called the ‘referent’: an actual tree, or else the image of one, rather than the concept or category of tree, which the text tells us the signified is, but the picture undercuts it.

- [5] The values that signifiers and signifieds consist of are their difference from all the other signifiers and signifieds in the language system, along two axes, one paradigmatic, the other syntagmatic. How do you depict *that*? Maybe it’s possible with modern computer graphics – but it doesn’t follow that depicting it will somehow bring us closer to understanding it.

Pure value cannot be pictured directly; describing it verbally is hard enough, and since it has no visual dimension, any illustration of it will of necessity be metaphorical. The illustrations in the published *Course* were powerful. But all we find in the students’ notes is what you see in the centre of the slide. The rest is the editors’ creation. It has engendered much misunderstanding. Yet it offered a way into Saussure’s conception of language for readers who might otherwise have found it impenetrable. Were it not for Sechehaye’s and Bally’s ‘betrayal’ of Saussure, he might have fallen into total obscurity, rather than becoming the founder of modern linguistics.

- [6] In the 1960s it would become an irresistible game to speculate about the sources of Saussure’s remarks about political economics. He never cites any. My own suggestion has been to look to the man whose course on the subject at the University of Geneva Saussure may have attended in 1875, according to independent evidence. Henri Dameth published his lectures as a book in 1865, with a second edition in 1878. In his second lecture he asks:

So, has political economics discovered the great generating fact that plays such a decisive role in constituting a science? – Yes, it is the notion of *value*. To such a degree

that a good many economists today propose defining political economics as *the science of value*.

Saussure too will confront the question of whether linguistics is a science, and what sort of science it is; and as we've seen, he argues that it is a science of values. When Dameth comes to explain price, he again does so in terms with echoes in Saussure's *Cours*: '(1) price is only the monetary expression of the value of goods; (2) in the formation of price, money only plays the role of a term of comparison between goods [...].'

Goods have a value, expressible in money, which is only a term of comparison – of difference – between goods. That conception of value as based on difference is what's distinctively Saussurean. Dameth lays it out as a principle but doesn't follow through; and frankly, neither does Saussure, although he pursues it further than anyone else.

I'm not proposing that Dameth 'influenced' Saussure. Without direct citations, or word-for-word repetition, 'influence' is too easy to suppose and impossible to disprove. But rather than point to more famous economists for whom there's no evidence that Saussure knew their work, we don't have to leave the University of Geneva to locate one whose treatment of value overlaps with Saussure's. Still, the links are superficial: Saussure uses economics as a sort of parable for the vision of language he's putting forward.

Why introduce value in conjunction with the need to separate the static from the evolutive, synchrony from diachrony? What would be the danger of not doing so? In economics, that was a timely question. In 1873 the USA and Germany adopted the gold standard. Theoreticians of economic value disputed whether it arose from the amount of work that went into a product, the usefulness of a product, or its scarcity, or a combination of the three, or other factors. Here already we see one type of diachrony-synchrony split, in that the amount of work that went into a product is a fact about its *history*. It doesn't determine the

value: if all that work produces something that isn't useful or attractive, it won't sell for more – unless, synchronically, what's socially valued is that labour-value. In which case the history [7] of production is embodied in the product, synchronically. In *Distinctions*, Bourdieu shows how the middle and especially the working classes react strongly against a painting they perceive as not having had much work put into it – which isn't an acceptable, 'legitimate' reaction for the professional critic or the upper-class aesthete, who's licensed only to pronounce on the 'vision' and the product of its execution, not the process.

To generalise from this and claim that the value of something is always determined by its history, or even just that it reflects it, would be unsustainable. That is however the claim made by the earliest and most powerful critiques of Saussure. When Voloshinov maintains that linguistic signs dynamically contain the class struggle that produces them, that's a denial of the synchrony-diachrony dichotomy. When the principle of the arbitrariness of the linguistic sign is challenged with evidence of iconicity, where the signifier in some way reproduces aspects of what it signifies, that too is about how the sign comes into being, why the signifier or chain of signifiers has the particular form it has: again an implicit assertion that diachrony cannot be separated from synchrony in the way Saussure insists it must.

Saussure's perspective is a modernist one. He thinks in terms of reducing things to the minimum level at which they function. The essential thing a linguistic sign must do is to signify, and what that requires is a signifier conjoined with a signified. The fact that signs vary across languages, change over time, and are used differently by individuals, means that the precise form signifiers and signifieds have, and *how* they're conjoined, can't be essential to their ability to signify. That doesn't leave their form or conjunction devoid of interest for linguists: on the contrary, as the *Course* says, the linguist's work is to find the patterns and links which limit the arbitrariness of linguistic signs. Limit it without however cancelling it: it remains the first principle of linguistic semiotics.

The examples of onomatopoeia in the *Course* – the sound of the whip in *fouet*, or of the trumpet in *glas*, are ones which *some* people hear, but have never occurred to most speakers of French, who are perfectly able to use the signs regardless. Actually those examples were supplied by Bally: Saussure's was *pluit* 'rains', where some people hear a drop of water. But even if we take an extreme case like *meow*, someone who's never seen or heard a cat can still use and understand the signifier /miau/ to signify one of the sounds a cat makes. I don't hear a dog barking in French *aboyer*, but it works for me as a sign.

For people who hear an iconicity in them, they function differently than for people who don't hear it: that should at least be the working presupposition for research. Saussure himself was deeply synaesthetic, and keenly aware of his sensory perception of vowels and how they varied orthographically; but he knew perfectly well that this was unique to him, and not a part of the socially-shared French language. And that despite his idiosyncrasy, the vowels and words containing them signified to all and sundry. His approach to language included a way of handling this: the distinction between the socially shared *langue* and each individual's *parole*. Iconicity and synaesthesia, inasmuch as signification can occur without them, are part of *parole*. Since language change always begins within *parole*, iconicity can affect it, even shape it; but once an iconically-shaped sign attains the social sanction that makes it part of a new state of the *langue*, the iconicity ceases to be necessary, even if it continues to be felt by some speakers, or nearly all speakers.

It logically takes just one speaker who doesn't perceive the iconicity to render it unnecessary for signifying; in fact, just one *potential* speaker who doesn't, and that potential is always there. But either way, the signs still perform the essential semiotic function: they signify. So long, that is, as they are distinctive from the other signs in the socially-shared system. That's the source of their value.

I asked earlier how value-as-difference can be represented visually. I submit that we should accept that attempts at visualisation have served a didactic purpose, but have bred deep misunderstanding. So what is the way forward? My proposal is that we should learn from what went wrong with Saussure's and Bally's presentations of the linguistic sign. The first mistake, I think, was to discuss signs that are nouns. It's surprising that Saussure did so, given that, as a linguist, he associated the language system not so much with the lexicon as with phonology and grammar. Morphology and syntax are relatively 'closed' systems, where it's easier to imagine the past tense, for instance, as what isn't present or future, or the third person as who or what isn't speaking or being spoken to, than it is to understand the value of 'tree' as 'not a bush', 'not a sapling', not everything that's different from a tree. And there's less risk of understanding the past tense as something physical, rather than as a conceptual

[8] value. Another metaphor Saussure used for value was that of chess, and there he was on a better track, because it was about how the chess pieces *move*, and how that has nothing to do with how they look. Still, it came back to the physical figures, which have no counterpart in language. What's needed is chess without chessmen.

So my programmatic call is for a Saussurean semiotics without pictures of trees, without sheep or mutton, without chessmen, just moves. A semiotics that trusts in the imaginative power of language. It will be a more faithfully linguistic semiotics if it draws its illustrations from grammar rather than lexicon. This is a problem in applied metaphor, finding metaphors for value that will be didactically effective and minimally misleading. But then, value is *itself* a metaphor when applied to semiotics. When we talk about value we're normally talking about *stuff*, and Saussure's point is that language isn't stuff. In representing value we're in the realm of *metametaphor*, where the slopes are slippery and landmines abound. Small steps, carefully trodden – like a king, not a bishop – and we may get there yet.